

A New Panfilov Production Has a Timely Message

By [John Freedman](#)

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Gleb Cherepanov says he does not intend to stage propaganda against Putin, despite the play's political theme. **John Freedman**

It wasn't planned to happen like this, but it did. Gleb Cherepanov's production of "I Wish to Speak" opened just one week before the Sept. 8 Moscow mayoral election.

"I Wish to Speak," for those who forgot, was an important film made by Gleb Panfilov in 1975. It observed the troubled changeover from a corrupt city manager — call him a mayor — to a replacement full of ideas for a better future.

Virtually all the work on Kira Malinina's radical adaptation of Panfilov's Soviet-era script for a contemporary audience was done last season, as were a large part of the rehearsals. This was well before anyone was thinking of electing a mayor.

The project was initiated by Kirill Serebrennikov, who was running a laboratory nurturing

several nascent productions under the auspices of the Russian Theater Union and his Gogol Center. He invited Cherepanov, who is 29, to propose a title.

"I chose this material," Cherepanov said recently after the penultimate rehearsal before the opener on Sunday. "Kirill wasn't crazy about it. He said, 'It's a good film, but what does it have to do with today?'"

Little did Serebrennikov know then.

"The themes of the piece are extremely timely," Cherepanov continued. "You don't have to read anything into them at all. It's a story about a person who makes a choice. Do you become a part of the system or do you step outside it?"

After a public dress rehearsal in June the respected critic Pavel Rudnev wrote in his blog that the work-in-progress was "an amazingly bold and precise story about how grand ideas lose their power, and about how dreams end in moral dead-end and despair when they are blocked by a flawed governmental system."

Cherepanov, however, had no intention of staging what he calls a "propaganda play against the powers-that-be or Putin."

"I'm posing a question that I cannot answer myself," he declared. "Life is more complex than that. We all live in systems. Theater is a system. And systems are like mafias. We justify ourselves when we make compromises for the sake of accomplishing something. We pay a price for compromising — as well as for refusing to compromise. In the end what I want to examine is how a person is broken."

For example, Cherepanov points out that in his production the former mayor, played by Irina Vybornova, is a villain by any common standard. "She is not that at all in our case," he added. "That just wouldn't be interesting."

In the role of the new mayor, an ambitious, well-intentioned idealist who immediately becomes bogged down in lies and deception, the director cast Oksana Mysina, one of the few actors who are not members of the Gogol Center company. "I wanted Oksana and only Oksana," the director said, "and Kirill agreed with my choice."

The performance plays out in eight different rooms in the Boyarskiye Palaty, or Chambers of the Nobility, at the Russian Theater Union. Spectators follow the actors as they move in space and time, catching glimpses of various scenes, including private family moments, public speeches, press conferences, a satirical avantgarde theater performance, chance meetings in an airport and an official visit to an elderly woman being given a state medal.

"I Wish to Speak" marks the Moscow debut for Cherepanov, who in the past has staged productions in Perm, Barnaul, Yaroslavl, Voronezh and other cities. But it is hardly the last we will see of this director who graduated from Valery Fokin's acting and directing course at the Shchukin Institute in 2010.

At present he has five productions slated for later this season at four major Moscow houses. Some details are still under wraps, but it is public knowledge that he will stage Maurice Maeterlinck's "The Blue Bird" at the Yermolova Theater, and a dramatization of Vadim

Abdrashitov's 1987 film "Plyumbum" at the Gogol Center.

"I Wish to Speak" plays next in mid-October, shortly after the results of Moscow's mayoral election are declared officially.

"I Wish to Speak" (Proshu Slova) plays Oct. 14 at 8 p.m. in the Boyarskiye Palaty of the Theater Union (STD), entrance located in the courtyard behind 10 Strastnoi Bulvar. Metro Chekhovskaya. Tel. 495-650-9522. start-std.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

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